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ABSTRACT

Problems encountered in mainstreaming are described in this paper, with a focus on ways to avert them. Mainstreaming refers to the placement of selected special needs students in the regular classroom. Negative teacher attitudes toward mainstreaming present a major obstacle. Because teachers have a significant effect on program effectiveness, the administrator must take the responsibility to change teacher attitudes. Recommendations are made to provide teacher support services, balanced workloads, and staff development programs to increase understanding of special needs students. (Contains 12 references.) (LMI)

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Mainstreaming: Lessons for Administrators

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There can be no question about the effect of Public Law 94:142 on the operation of schools. In the nearly two decades since its enactment, the impact has been strongly felt in terms of economics, delivery of educational services, and general school operation. The research clearly shows, however, that thee are some warning signs which need to be heeded by administrators. It is appropriate to outline some of those warnings and to suggested strategies designed to avert possible difficulties over the full and effective implementation of mainstreaming as a preferred placement for many students with special needs.

Mainstreaming

While the concept of mainstreaming is not new, the use of the technique was greatly accelerated due to various legislative actions (Bates, 1981). The idea of placing selected special needs students in the regular classroom with an alterations in learning modalities, assessment procedures, and home learning assignments allows schools to simultaneously satisfy three educational goals:

1) Provide for the least restrictive environment for students with special needs.

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2) Establish a cost effective means of providing educational opportunities for that part of the student population having special needs.

3) Maintain a means for special education students to accomplish the educational goals of the normal instructional program.

One would expect all segments of the educational community to welcome mainstreaming as a viable option for special needs students. However, many have yet to accept the practice as workable. Effective implementation requires considerable effort. So, in recent years, research has pointed to some warning flags, flags that administrators need to heed in order to properly provide an appropriate education to classified students.

Messages from Research

A teacher's attitude toward mainstreaming will have significant impact on the effectiveness of the program (Martin, 1976). Further, we can experientially suggest that, if the attitude of the teacher is positive, effort and results will be maximized.

In general, teacher and administrator attitudes towards the concept of mainstreaming started out very positively (Birch, 1974) but, as time went on, those attitudes frequently became less positive. The reduction is positive attitude was initially traceable to the increased workload placed on the regular teachers who had mainstreamed students within their classes. Workload, however, was not the only factor in the decline.

It has been pointed out that regular teachers' attitudes and performance are influenced more by their judgement of the special education teacher and

the role of that teacher than by actual attitude toward the students (Humphrey, Hoffman, & Crosby, 1984). While this may be a human reaction, it is not a professional one.

Research has also suggested that major factors which influence teacher attitude include support service provided by the special educator, the level of the classified student, physical attractiveness of the student, nature of the disability, and class composition. While this may be true, it does not negate the fact that the law requires mainstreaming to take place, and it is the task of each administrator to assure that each student receives an approppriate educational experiences within the regular class.

The negative factors seem to increase with the grade placement of the students. High School teachers, for example, are more likely to have negative views than our early elementary teachers (Enoc, 1980; Larrivee, 1982). One could argue that this may be the result of an increasing subject centered education rather than the student centered type found in most elementary schools. A recent national study of the preparation of secondary school teachers (Rieck, 1991) has shown that 68% of the reporting institutions do not believe their students are completely prepared to deal with mainstreaming. The fact remains, however, that mainstreaming must take place at all levels.

Another disturbing part of the picture is an apparent reduction in teachers' positive attitudes as the teacher gains experience (Knight, 1986). As teachers enter service and start working with mainstreamed students, they experience frustration,face an increased level of behavior problems, and have to exert additional effort to modify instruction, all of which results in reduced enthusiasm over the process. It is clear that action needs to be taken to help teachers maintain a positive attitude. Administrators can help, providing they have a positive attitude.

It is unfortunate, but true, that while the importance of the principal and other administrators is well documented (Bonds and Lindsay, 1982) so is the fact that administrator attitudes usually parallel those of the teachers (Knight, 1986; D'Antoni, 1976). This situation cannot be accepted as it could result in a faculty having negative attitudes which is being led by administrators who have a similar set of attitudes. What is needed, then, is a way to change attitudes. With attitudinal improvement, the effectiveness of programs dealing with classified students in the regular program should also improve.

Administrator's Role

The studies previously cited have identified many reasons for less than positive attitudes. Some are out of the control of the school, but there are two general areas which can be addressed and that, if successful, will lead to an overall improvement in the delivery of services:

1) Teacher attitudes which result from the lack of appropriate support from special educators and administrators.

2) Teacher attitudes which are the result of characteristics of the handicapping condition or societal views toward special students.

Increasing Support

Administrators must assure that proper support is given the classroom teacher. This support includes:

1) Time to confer with special educators.
2) Quality staff development programs on mainstreaming.

3) Assure reasonable load balance among the regular teaching staff.

4) Provide appropriate service from special educators and administrators.

Released time for regular and special educators to work together is essential. Regular teachers may correctly feel that the mainstreamed student places an additional burden on them. In many cases the classroom teacher is not well prepared to deal with special students. To expect teachers, at any level, to work effectively with students having special needs without providing time for consultation may very well doom the proper implementation of the student's IEP. At least a half hour a week needs to be made available, more if the teacher has several classified students.

Administration can not expect all regular teachers to truly understand the concept of mainstreaming. To some teachers it is simply placing students in a regular class; to others it means lowering students. Neither of these views is correct. To assist teachers in developing a more realistic picture of mainstreaming, it is appropriate to have a good staff development program. While it is recognized that there are teachers who will be antagonistic toward such a program, we must accept the premise that all teachers need to develop skills and competencies in dealing with the classified student. It has been suggested (Rieck, 1989) that a linkage between professional evaluation and required professional growth activity frequently results in improved performance; such a linkage will work with more reluctant teachers.

One of us is a former building principal and knows all too well that administrators frequently place a heavier load on to a effective, cooperative teacher. Don't , it leads to "burnout", and a feeling of being"used". Teachers are very sensitive to unequal loads and the inequality is acutely felt when one

teacher has more mainstreamed students than another teacher with the same assignment.

The role of the special educator with respect to the regular teacher is crucial. Special educators are teachers with expertise in dealing with specific disabilities, they are not supervisors or lead teachers. All teachers have special training in given areas and it must be remembered that the regular teacher and the special teacher are colleagues. For a special teacher to be most effective, the administrator must make sure that the special educator:

1) Be supportive of and informative to the regular teacher without giving the impression of superiority.

2) Be available to teachers when they ask for assistance.

3) Make certain to have regular meetings with teachers, at which time the progress of students is discussed; share the IEP and encourage regular teachers to make suggestions.

The regular teacher must be able to adopt a posture of understanding and flexibility when it comes to mainstreamed students. The research has shown that when special educators are viewed as supportive and behave as enumerated above, regular teacher attitudes are more positive.

Attitudes from Conditioning

The second area relates to human relations. It has been shown that the way professionals relate to teaching mainstreamed students is dependent on their pre-conditioned attitudes relative to appearance and other characteristics of classified students (Knight, 1986). It has also been demonstrated that the way teachers and administrators deal with "at risk" students (Whelan, Torbet, and Teddlie, 1990) has a significant impact on the attitudes and behaviors of those students. An extrapolation of their data would suggest that similar gains in attitudes and behavior can be achieved if the same human relations skills were employed when dealing with classified students. In the study, Whelan evaluates various programs and found that, when teachers and administrators received staff development activities on the proper way to react and speak with the student population, the educational results of the students were much more positive. It can, therefor, be conjectured that similar improvement in the performance of classified students could be achieved using the same techniques and approaches as practiced toward the at risk population.

Summary

While research has demonstrated that teachers and administrators may have negative attitudes towards mainstreamed students, it has also pointed the way to some causes. Many of these causes can be successfully addressed by the administrator via support service, balanced load, and innovative staff development programs. Such actions will lead to improved results in the the affective and cognitive domains.

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